



Woman in the Novels of Ghassan Kanfani: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Women, especially Palestinian women have been prime focus of noted authors across the globe, who also attracted attentions of many great novelists and renowned writers. In spite of their different orientations and schools, different issues related to women cover a larger part of these novelists and writers' books.

The women characters of Palestinian novels vary from being mother, teenage girl, independent and married woman to iconic revolutionary, highly educated and well-skilled leading woman. But the issue that combines them altogether is the commonality in their sense of deprivation, displacement and alienation in their own land Palestine.

*The Palestinian novelists have been aware of the Palestinian women's association with their society. So, it has been found in the writings of various novelists like **Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Rashad Abu-Sahr, Sehar Khalifa, Liyana Badar and Ghassan Kanfani (the most prominent Palestinian writer)** that, they were the voice of the oppressed, especially women in a patriarchal society, in which they portrayed different aspects of Palestinian women, and made them aware of the roles they could play in nation-building, and in igniting the spirit against illegal occupation of their homeland.*

Given the above realization, the prime objective of the present study is to analyze the perspective of different dimensions and aspects related to women in Ghassan's novels. Lastly, this study attempts to explain the image of woman in Arabic novels as well as the present Arabic literary environment in Palestine.

Keywords: *Palestinian women, Image of woman, Arabic novels, Palestinian novelists, Woman in the patriarchal society, Different orientations and Schools.*

Ghassan Kanfani: Ghassan Kanfani, the Palestinian revolutionary writer, was born on April 09, 1936 to a poor Palestinian family. Before his birth, the family lived in the city of Yafa (a neighbouring city of Tal Aviv), but because of clashes between Jewish and Arab community, the family decided to migrate to Akka in 1947. Therefore, Ghassan was brought up witnessing a number of deadly situations in the city of Akka, especially during the first fierce attack in 1948, which left a profound impact on his literary revolutionary thinking.

Education and Activities: Kanfani's life was not confined to one activity, but it was full of scientific, literary and political activities. During his education, he frequently visited different cities such as Damascus, Kuwait and Beirut. After completion of his secondary education, he got an opportunity to teach in a refugee school. A few months later, he enrolled in the Damascus University to learn Arabic literature, where he found an environment conducive to interact with the Arab Nationalists, and joined the Arab Nationalist Movement that marked a full stop on his university education.

Ghassan Kanfani: A School of Palestinian Literature: Ghassan is considered one of the outstanding literary figures, who pioneered the second generation of the Palestinian writers, and introduced the literature of resistance to the world. He was an excellent writer with an ultimate aim to the Palestinian cause, which gives a true symbol of realism to his works focusing on struggles and hardships the Palestinians face in everyday life. Although it has been more than 40 years since the author was killed, his works remains vividly relevant: **Men in the Sun**, is about refugees trying to smuggle themselves into a place where they might find work; **“Return to Haifa”** tells about family and loss, while **“the Land of the Sad Orange”** depicts an untold story of tragedies and sorrows in the Palestinian society.

Dimensions of woman characters in Arab novels: Critic Madhat Al-Jabbar finds no difference between a male and female novelists in assaying woman characters in their writings, but what puts them at difference in their approach to the depiction of woman is their perspective towards woman folk, that is what exactly we see in the women novelist writings such as Hanna Meena, and Sahar Khalifa portraying woman in the most beautiful and elegant ways or in the most unfavorable situation that enables them appeal for sympathy, while male novelists are by no means hesitant to give more layers and flavors to woman characters, thus we find “Najib Mahfooz” penning all types of women in the 20th century. The woman characters in the writings of Najib Mahfooz especially his “Trilogy”’s vary from being infamous, notorious, dancer and petty domestic help to being disloyal to her husband and even having criminal aspect such as killer. These various woman images were depicted in different social situations.

We also find Yusuf Idris, a prominent Egyptian writer of the 20th century, essaying every possible aspects of woman in Arab society, the woman characters of his novels “Aib” and “Haram” revolve around women embroiled in the most pathetic conditions of their lives. So through the different layers of their characters as working woman, oppressed one in the male dominated society as well as lone bread winner for her family's survival, they represent true image of the society as a whole in the 20th century.

The persona of woman in the gulf writings is multi-dimensional, so we find situations symbolized by woman who aspires to mix with the modern society, but cautious enough to keep herself at bay from the unethical practices associated with the newly emerging multi-cultural society, besides, we see woman is the substantial ingredients of the Palestinian writings, as we find a panorama of woman characters such as **“Rafif” in “Ibadus Shams” of (Khalifa Sahar), “Fajr” in “Al-bukao ala sadrilhabib” of “Abu Shawar”, “Sadiya”**

in “**Sabbar**” of “**Sahar Khalifa**”, “**Umme Hasan**” in “**Usshaq**” of “**(Rashad)**” playing various characters, which reflect woman’s inevitable association with the society, and deal neatly with the brother-sister, father-daughter and male-female relationships.

Woman and the History of the Arabic novels: It goes without saying that woman’s presence in the Arabic Novels is not closely associated with the emergence of this literary form, though a number of earlier novels titled “**Zunubya**”, “**Aasma**”, “**Badur**”, “**Salma**”, “**Samya**” etc were named after woman, but it was only symbolic with a hidden purpose to attract readers’ attentions, and sometimes to copy the European writing style. When we look back at the history of the Arabic Novels, we find a substantial change in this very pattern, so later on, in the beginning of the 20th century, the image of woman became clearer, and her character got many meaningful aspects, she was an active player in the society, that is exactly what we see, for instance, in Najib Mahfooz’s fictional world, who is considered the most prominent novelist of the 20th century, whose unique narrative style created spaces in the contemporary Arabic fictional world, his Trilogy “**Bain Al-Qasrain**”(Between the Two Palaces), “**Qasr Al-Showq**” (The Palace of Longing), and “**Al-Sukkaryya**” (Sugar Street), published in the 1960’s, produces a panorama of women in Arab society. The fictional worlds constructed by major Arab novelists (such as Najib Mahfooz, Abd Al-Rahman Munif, Hanna Meena, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and others) in their narrative innovation sharply observe the transformations and contradictions of the Arab social situation in all its aspects, particularly male-female relationships.

Woman in the writings of Ghassan Kanfani: Ghassan Kanfani successfully tried his best to portray woman with every possible aspect, which stands testimonial to the realism we see in his writings, which makes his vision about woman pretty clear, so woman in his fiction is found fighting against all odds, she is seen combating profound sorrows and unmitigated miseries, she bears the brunt of losing her land, she undergoes exile and deportation, so much so that she witnesses the killings of her father, brother and husband, but she does not lose hope, and shows exemplary courage and valor, she firmly stands resistant to the confiscation of her land, strongly condemns the acts of violence inflicted on her community, So Kanfani’s writings allow the readers to explore a number of womanly characters, some of which I will try to analyze in the following paragraphs.

Combating woman: In the fictional world created by Ghassan Kanfani, woman is seen as central pole around whom the political, rebellion and combating themes revolve, so the story “**Shaiun La Yazhab**”(The memoire that does not leave), introduces the first Palestinian combating woman (Laila), who conducts many extremist operations in Haifa. The above mentioned story is the unique combination of realism and fiction. She is characterized with ideal heroic merits that separate her from other traditional women, she is blessed with a righteous piercing concise, which urges her to help others stranded in their ordeals.

The central point of the story is to make aware of the Palestinian women, in particular, and others, in general, that they are not unequalled in the male-dominated patriarchal

society, they can relatively play an equal pivotal role in the society as well. They are not traditionally shackled confining themselves to the limits of their homes, but can proactively take part in changing the destiny of their people.

Resisting woman: Though woman has been vocal point and prime subject of many Arab prominent literary figures, who introduced unimagined womanly aspects to the readers, but Kanfani's vision about woman is very different from his counterparts, he was a writer per excellence with an aim to raise the Palestinian issue to the world community, and to depict humiliations, oppressions the Palestinians were subjected to. "the Land of the Sad Orange" is one of his early stories, that portrays the influence of the deportation on the Palestinians when the Israeli troops took over their country in 1948. He had a very clear vision about the occupation and its repercussions. In his writings, he skillfully chose and expertly focused on the woman folk to make them courageous enough to spearhead towards the goal of the liberation, thus in his writings, we see woman rises to rebellion and play resistant against all forms of social injustices sensitizing them enough to take part in the national movement, so In the novella "**All That's Left to You**" the readers find an expertly curved out woman character symbolized by "**Maryam**", the novella presents the story of a brother and sister living in Gaza, who separate from their family. The Palestinian attachment to land and family, and the sorrow over losses are characterized by a young man's seething anger and shame over his sister's sexual disgrace. The story is that of a man **Hamid**, who flees across the desert to Jordan, leaving his sister "**Maryam**" behind, who is married to **Zakarya**, after getting herself pregnant with him outside the wedlock, **Hamid** is ashamed with his sister's untimely pregnancy and leaves her to Jordan. In his journey through the desert to Jordan, Hamid ambushes an Israeli border guard, who loses his connection with his unit, on the other side, his sister, who lives with her husband (previously married with five children), can no longer bear with her new subjugation and sharing her husband with other women, as a result, she ends up stabbing him in frenzy. The story, narrated by Ghassan Kanfani, is widely considered the masterpiece of his writings, and set a benchmark for the Arab fictional world. It is a rare combination of nationalism, resistance, sorrows over the losses of lives and lands, which holds mirror to the world community, of the pathetic, unfavorable conditions the Palestinians were reeling under through.

Nevertheless, there are a few characters in the novella, but the situation symbolized by "**Maryam**" forms the essence of the story, which depicts women's unending ordeals, emboldening them to take extreme steps to set them free from the prevailing practices in an unequal society.

Motherly character of woman: A large number writers and scholars have widely debated on the womanly aspects in Kanfani's writings. Some of them are of the view that in his writings, the woman folk has found a lively expression for themselves, his writings not only talk about them, but make them stronger to raise their long suppressed voices. D/Najma Barbar,(an American origin

scholar, who holds the degree of Phd on the study of competitive literatures) says: Ghassan Kanfani has given a distinguished place to the woman folk as we see in his writings that they are not stagnant but profoundly active and pretty alive”.

Kanfani was not only a brilliant and prolific sensitive writer but was also a firm believer in the principal of equality. He was a strong opponent against the traditional disparity between man and woman, his innovations sufficiently dealt with woman issues. Though Kanfani’s writings include every character a woman can be symbolized with, but in many of his works the character played by a mother is utterly remarkable, this very character has a profound impact on the basic themes of his many novels, so much so that a novel titled “Umm-e-Saa’d”(Mother of Saa’d) is dedicated to this motherly woman character.

Umm-e-Qais (Mother of Qais) in the novel Men in the Sun: After thoroughly reading the novel “**Men in the Sun**”, the readers find that Mother of Qais has a negative and indirect influence among other characters of the novel, but the role she plays as Mother of Qais can not be ignored. Since her presence in the novel is inventible, she is an integral part of the story. So in the context of the narration, we see Abu Qais (Father of Qaias), who lives in sheer poverty, is very optimist, and hopes to change his family’s destiny by venturing to the town of Iltiqa-un-Nahrain (the meeting point of the tow rivers). In this context, if we examine the social situation at large in the years following the Israeli troops takeover of Palestine in 1948, no one can deny the fact that woman is no less than man in her contribution to the society, and she was as prominently active as man, even we find her equally facing every difficult situation with man, that is what exactly Kanfani narrates about Umm-e-Qais (Mother of Qais), who encourages her husband to venture out to end their miseries. In this very context, we see Kanfani continues to search for the humanitarian aspect in the husband-wife relationship. He depicts his imagine by making the husband’s love alive and arising his emotions to his wife, who feels: his wife is on the brink of weeping with her teary eyes, her upper lips shake a little, and as a result, the tears will roll down her beautiful and delicate chicks”.

From the above paragraph, it is abundantly clear that Kanfani tries to narrate the emotion-filled situation and love of Umm-e-Qais (Mother of Qais) for her husband, whom she wants to go to earn money, but simultaneously, she gets vervous over the separation from her husband, and she is terribly scared of his life. In this context of the novel, Kanfani brilliantly depicts the husband-wife inter-woven relationship, but on the other side, he also sensitively narrates woman’s feelings as mother and wife.

Likewise, almost every novel such as “**Men in the Sun**”, “**What is Left to You**”, “**Umm-e-Sas’d**”, “**Return to Haifa**”, “**Al-Aama-Wal-Atrash**”, and “**the Other Thing**” has especially curved out the role played by a mother, who is an integral part of the stories.

Conclusion:

Ghassan Kanfani's life and career were closely connected to the situation of the Palestinians, and his intense involvement in the Palestinian affairs helped him develop a unique vintage point. His prolific writings to that day testify to a brilliant and sensitive mind, whose writings were and still are some of the best on issues of exile and the struggle for self-determination.

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